

# The Columbus Controversy



The Man and the Myth

# Columbus Day Celebrates Western Civilization

By Thomas Bowden (*Bucks County Courier Times*, October 11, 2007)

On October 12, 1492, Christopher Columbus discovered the New World, opening a sea route to vast uncharted territories that awaited the spread of Western civilization. Centuries later, the ensuing cultural migration culminated in the birth and explosive growth of the greatest nation in history: the United States of America.

It is fitting that we have set aside a day to honor the Great Explorer. On one level, Columbus Day honors the man himself for his many virtues. Columbus was a man of independent mind, who steadfastly pursued his bold plan for a westward voyage to the Indies despite powerful opposition--a man of courage, who set sail upon a trackless ocean with no assurance that he would ever reach land--a man of pride, who sought recognition and reward for his achievements.

We need not evade or excuse Columbus's flaws--his religious zealotry, his enslavement and oppression of natives--to recognize that he made history by finding new territory for a civilization that would soon show mankind how to overcome the age-old scourges of slavery, war, and forced religious conversion.

Thus, the deeper meaning of Columbus Day is to celebrate the rational core of Western civilization, which flourished in the New World like a pot-bound plant liberated from its confining shell, demonstrating to the world what greatness is possible to man at his best.

On Columbus Day, we celebrate the civilization whose philosophers and mathematicians, men such as Aristotle, Archimedes, and Euclid, displaced otherworldly mysticism by discovering the laws of logic and mathematical relationships, demonstrating to mankind that reality is a single realm accessible to human understanding.

On Columbus Day, we celebrate the civilization whose scientists, men such as Galileo, Newton, Darwin, and Einstein, banished primitive superstitions by discovering natural laws through the scientific method, demonstrating to mankind that the universe is both knowable and predictable.

On Columbus Day, we celebrate the civilization whose political geniuses, men such as John Locke and the Founding Fathers, defined the principles by which bloody tribal warfare, religious strife, and, ultimately, slavery could be eradicated by constitutional republics devoted to protecting life, liberty, property, and the selfish pursuit of individual happiness.

On Columbus Day, we celebrate the civilization whose entrepreneurs, men such as Rockefeller, Ford, and Gates, transformed an inhospitable wilderness populated by frightened savages into a wealthy nation of self-confident producers served by highways, power plants, computers, and thousands of other life-enhancing products.

On Columbus Day, in sum, we celebrate Western civilization as history's greatest cultural achievement. What better reason could there be for a holiday?

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## The Christopher Columbus Controversy

By Michael S. Berliner (*Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 30, 1991; *Buffalo News*, Jan. 12, 1992; *Hartford Courant*, Jan. 3, 1992; *San Jose Mercury News*, Jan. 5, 1992; *Charlotte Observer*, Jan. 5, 1992; *Akron Beacon Journal*, Jan. 5, 1992; *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, Jan. 6, 1992; *Allentown Morning Call*, Jan. 6, 1992; *Asbury Park Press*, Jan. 7, 1992; *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Jan. 8, 1992; *Orange County Register*, Oct. 11, 1992; *Daily Oklahoman*, Oct. 11, 1992; *Tennessean*, Oct. 9, 1995; *Virginian-Pilot*, Dec. 9, 1995; *Providence Journal*, Oct. 12, 1996; *Salt Lake Tribune*, Oct. 12, 1997; *Daily News of Los Angeles*, Oct. 13, 1997; *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, Oct. 1, 1998; *Augusta Chronicle*, Oct. 10, 1999; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Oct. 11, 1999; *Houston Chronicle*, Oct. 7, 2001; *Florida Times Union*, Oct. 11, 2002; *Washington Times*, Oct. 15, 2002; *El Nuevo Herald*, Oct. 12, 2003)

Columbus Day approaches, but to the "politically correct" this is no cause for celebration. On the contrary, they view the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492 as an occasion to be mourned. They have mourned, they have attacked, and they have intimidated schools across the country into replacing Columbus Day celebrations with "ethnic diversity" days.

The politically correct view is that Columbus did not discover America, because people had lived here for thousands of years. Worse yet, it's claimed, the main legacy of Columbus is death and destruction. Columbus is routinely vilified as a symbol of slavery and genocide, and the celebration of his arrival likened to a celebration of Hitler and the Holocaust. The attacks on Columbus are ominous, because the actual target is Western civilization.

Did Columbus "discover" America? Yes--in every important respect. This does not mean that no human eye had been cast on America before Columbus arrived. It does mean that Columbus brought America to the attention of the civilized world, i.e., to the growing, scientific civilizations of Western Europe. The result, ultimately, was the United States of America. It was Columbus' discovery for Western Europe that led to the influx of ideas and people on which this nation was founded--and on which it still rests. The opening of America brought the ideas and achievements of Aristotle, Galileo, Newton, and the thousands of thinkers, writers, and inventors who followed.

Prior to 1492, what is now the United States was sparsely inhabited, unused, and undeveloped. The inhabitants were primarily hunter-gatherers, wandering across the land, living from hand-to-mouth and from day-to-day. There was virtually no change, no growth for thousands of years. With rare exception, life was nasty, brutish, and short: there was no wheel, no written language, no division of labor, little agriculture and scant permanent settlement; but there were endless, bloody wars. Whatever the problems it brought, the vilified Western culture also brought enormous, undreamed-of benefits, without which most of today's Indians would be infinitely poorer or not even alive.

Columbus should be honored, for in so doing, we honor Western civilization. But the critics do not want to bestow such honor, because their real goal is to denigrate the values of Western civilization and to glorify the primitivism, mysticism, and collectivism embodied in the tribal cultures of American Indians. They decry the glorification of the West as "Eurocentrism." We should, they claim, replace our reverence for Western civilization with multi-culturalism, which regards all cultures as morally equal. In fact, they aren't. Some cultures are better than others: a free society is better than slavery; reason is better than brute force as a way to deal with other men; productivity is better than stagnation. In fact, Western civilization stands for man at his best. It stands for the values that make human life possible: reason, science, self-reliance, individualism, ambition, productive achievement. The values of Western civilization are values for all men; they cut across gender, ethnicity, and geography. We should honor Western civilization not for the ethnocentric reason that some of us happen to have European ancestors but because it is the objectively superior culture.

Underlying the political collectivism of the anti-Columbus crowd is a racist view of human nature. They claim that one's identity is primarily ethnic: if one thinks his ancestors were good, he will supposedly feel good about himself; if he thinks his ancestors were bad, he will supposedly feel self-loathing. But it doesn't work; the achievements or failures of one's ancestors are monumentally irrelevant to one's actual worth as a person. Only the lack of a sense of self leads one to look to others to provide what passes for a sense of identity. Neither the deeds nor misdeeds of others are his own; he can take neither credit nor blame for what someone else chose to do. There are no racial achievements or racial failures, only individual achievements and individual failures. One cannot inherit moral worth or moral vice. "Self-esteem through others" is a self-contradiction. Thus the sham of "preserving one's heritage" as a rational life goal. Thus the cruel hoax of "multicultural education" as an antidote to racism: it will continue to create more racism.

Individualism is the only alternative to the racism of political correctness. We must recognize that everyone is a sovereign entity, with the power of choice and independent judgment. That is the ultimate value of Western civilization, and it should be proudly proclaimed.

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The following appeared on a full page of the *Rocky Mountain News* on Saturday, October 8, 1994.]

**An Open Letter From the AMERICAN INDIAN MOVEMENT of Colorado and Our Allies**

When the Taino Indians saved Christopher Columbus from certain death on the fateful morning of October 12, 1492, a glorious opportunity presented itself for the cultures of both Europe and the Americas to flourish. What occurred was neither glorious nor heroic. Just as Columbus could not, and did not, "[discover](#)" a hemisphere already inhabited by nearly 100 million people, his arrival cannot, and will not, be recognized by indigenous peoples as a heroic and festive event.

From a Native perspective, Columbus' arrival was a disaster from the beginning. Although his own diaries reveal that he was greeted by the Tainos with the most generous hospitality he had ever known, he immediately began the enslavement and slaughter of the Indian peoples of the Caribbean.

Defenders of Columbus and his holiday argue that critics unfairly judge Columbus, a 15th Century product, by the moral and legal standards of the late 20th century. Such a defense implies that there were no legal or moral constraints on actions such as Columbus' in 1492. In reality, European legal and moral principles acknowledged the natural rights of Indians and prohibited their slaughter or unjust wars against them.

The issue of Columbus and Columbus Day is not easily resolvable by dismissing Columbus, the man. Columbus Day is a perpetuation of racist assumptions that the Americas were a [wasteland](#) cluttered with dark skin savages awaiting the blessings of European "civilization." Throughout this hemisphere, educational systems and the popular media perpetuate the myth that indigenous peoples have contributed nothing to the world, and, consequently, we should be grateful for our colonization, our dispossession, and our microwave ovens.

The racist Columbus legacy enables every country in this hemisphere, including the United States, to continue its destruction of Indian peoples, from the jungles of Brazil to the highlands of Guatemala, from the Chaco of Paraguay to the Western Shoshone Nation in Nevada. Indian people remain in a perpetual state of danger from the system begun by Columbus in 1492. The Columbus legacy throughout the Americas keeps Indian people at the bottom of every socio-economic indicator. We are under continuing physical, legal and political attack, and are afforded the least access to political and legal remedies. Nevertheless we continue to resist and we refuse to surrender our spirituality, to assimilate, or to disappear into Hollywood's romantic sunset.

To dignify Columbus and his legacy with parades, holidays and other celebrations is repugnant. As the original peoples of this land, we cannot, and we will not, tolerate social and political festivities that celebrate our genocide. We are committed to the active, open, and public rejection of disrespect and racism in its various forms--including Columbus Day and Columbus Day parades.

For the past five years the American Indian Movement of Colorado and our allies have been compelled to confront and resist the continuing Columbus legacy in the streets of Denver. For every hour spent organizing non-violent opposition to the Columbus parade, we have lost an hour that we were not able to use in assisting indigenous treaty rights struggles, land recovery strategies, and the advancement of indigenous self-determination.

However, one positive benefit of our efforts was the public debate over Columbus Day that has spread into the public schools as an educational tool for students and their teachers. Overall, we view the demise of the Columbus Day Parade in Denver as a welcome opportunity to move beyond the divisive symbolism of the past.

We therefore suggest the replacement of Columbus Day with a celebration that is more inclusive and that more accurately reflects the cultural and racial richness of the Americas. We also suggest that the community support a more honest portrayal of social evolution in this hemisphere and a greater respect for all people on the margins of the dominating society. There is no more appropriate place for this transformation to occur than in Colorado, the birthplace of the Columbus Day holiday.

This statement represents the position of the:

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## **Columbus Day? True Legacy: Cruelty and Slavery**

By Eric Kasum ([http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-kasum/columbus-day-a-bad-idea\\_b\\_742708.html?view=print&comm\\_ref=false](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/eric-kasum/columbus-day-a-bad-idea_b_742708.html?view=print&comm_ref=false))

Once again, it's time to celebrate Columbus Day. Yet, the stunning truth is: If Christopher Columbus were alive today, he would be put on trial for crimes against humanity. Columbus' reign of terror, as documented by noted historians, was so bloody, his legacy so unspeakably cruel, that Columbus makes a modern villain like Saddam Hussein look like a pale codfish.

Question: Why do we honor a man who, if he were alive today, would almost certainly be sitting on Death Row awaiting execution?

If you'd like to know the true story about Christopher Columbus, please read on. But I warn you, it's not for the faint of heart.

Here's the basics. On the second Monday in October each year, we celebrate Columbus Day (this year, it's on October 11th). We teach our school kids a cute little song that goes: "In 1492, Columbus sailed the ocean blue." It's an American tradition, as American as pizza pie. Or is it? Surprisingly, the true story of Christopher Columbus has very little in common with the myth we all learned in school.

Columbus Day, as we know it in the United States, was invented by the Knights of Columbus, a Catholic fraternal service organization. Back in the 1930s, they were looking for a Catholic hero as a role-model their kids could look up to. In 1934, as a result of lobbying by the Knights of Columbus, Congress and President Franklin Roosevelt signed Columbus Day into law as a federal holiday to honor this courageous explorer. Or so we thought.

There are several problems with this. First of all, Columbus wasn't the first European to discover America. As we all know, the Viking, Leif Ericson probably founded a Norse village on Newfoundland some 500 years earlier. So, hat's off to Leif. But if you think about it, the whole concept of discovering America is, well, arrogant. After all, the Native Americans discovered North America about 14,000 years before Columbus was even born! Surprisingly, DNA evidence now suggests that courageous Polynesian adventurers sailed dugout canoes across the Pacific and settled in South America long before the Vikings.

Second, Columbus wasn't a hero. When he set foot on that sandy beach in the Bahamas on October 12, 1492, Columbus discovered that the islands were inhabited by friendly, peaceful people called the Lucayans, Taínos and Arawaks. Writing in his diary, Columbus said they were a handsome, smart and kind people. He noted that the gentle Arawaks were remarkable for their hospitality. "They offered to share with anyone and when you ask for something, they never say no," he said. The Arawaks had no weapons; their society had neither criminals, prisons nor prisoners. They were so kind-hearted that Columbus noted in his diary that on the day the Santa Maria was shipwrecked, the Arawaks labored for hours to save his crew and cargo. The native people were so honest that not one thing was missing.

Columbus was so impressed with the hard work of these gentle islanders, that he immediately seized their land for Spain and enslaved them to work in his brutal gold mines. Within only two years, 125,000 (half of the population) of the original natives on the island were dead.

If I were a Native American, I would mark October 12, 1492, as a black day on my calendar.

He forced these peaceful natives work in his gold mines until they died of exhaustion. If an "Indian" worker did not deliver his full quota of gold dust by Columbus' deadline, soldiers would cut off the man's hands and tie them around his neck to send a message. Slavery was so intolerable for these sweet, gentle island people that at one

point, 100 of them committed mass suicide. Catholic law forbade the enslavement of Christians, but Columbus solved this problem. He simply refused to baptize the native people of Hispaniola.

On his second trip to the New World, Columbus brought cannons and attack dogs. If a native resisted slavery, he would cut off a nose or an ear. If slaves tried to escape, Columbus had them burned alive. Other times, he sent attack dogs to hunt them down, and the dogs would tear off the arms and legs of the screaming natives while they were still alive. If the Spaniards ran short of meat to feed the dogs, Arawak babies were killed for dog food.

Columbus' acts of cruelty were so unspeakable and so legendary - even in his own day - that Governor Francisco De Bobadilla arrested Columbus and his two brothers, slapped them into chains, and shipped them off to Spain to answer for their crimes against the Arawaks. But the King and Queen of Spain, their treasury filling up with gold, pardoned Columbus and let him go free.

One of Columbus' men, Bartolome De Las Casas, was so mortified by Columbus' brutal atrocities against the native peoples, that he quit working for Columbus and became a Catholic priest. He described how the Spaniards under Columbus' command cut off the legs of children who ran from them, to test the sharpness of their blades. According to De Las Casas, the men made bets as to who, with one sweep of his sword, could cut a person in half. He says that Columbus' men poured people full of boiling soap. In a single day, De Las Casas was an eye witness as the Spanish soldiers dismembered, beheaded, or raped 3000 native people. "Such inhumanities and barbarisms were committed in my sight as no age can parallel," De Las Casas wrote. "My eyes have seen these acts so foreign to human nature that now I tremble as I write."

De Las Casas spent the rest of his life trying to protect the helpless native people. But after a while, there were no more natives to protect. Experts generally agree that before 1492, the population on the island of Hispaniola probably numbered above 3 million. Within 20 years of Spanish arrival, it was reduced to only 60,000. Within 50 years, not a single original native inhabitant could be found.

In 1516, Spanish historian Peter Martyr wrote: "... a ship without compass, chart, or guide, but only following the trail of dead Indians who had been thrown from the ships could find its way from the Bahamas to Hispaniola."

Christopher Columbus derived most of his income from slavery, De Las Casas noted. In fact, Columbus was the first slave trader in the Americas. As the native slaves died off, they were replaced with black slaves. Columbus' son became the first African slave trader in 1505.

Are you surprised you never learned about any of this in school? I am too. Why do we have this extraordinary gap in our American ethos? Columbus himself kept detailed diaries, as did some of his men including De Las Casas and Michele de Cuneo. (If you don't believe me, just Google the words Columbus, sex slave, and gold mine.)

Columbus' reign of terror is one of the darkest chapters in our history. The REAL question is: Why do we celebrate a holiday in honor of this man? (Take three deep breaths. If you're like me, your stomach is heaving at this point. I'm sorry. Sometimes the truth hurts. That said, I'd like to turn in a more positive direction.)

Call me crazy, but I think holidays ought to honor people who are worthy of our admiration, true heroes who are positive role models for our children. If we're looking for heroes we can truly admire, I'd like to offer a few candidates. Foremost among them are school kids.